
Taking Time for Each Family Member

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"A word spoken in due season, how good is it!"
(Proverbs 15:23).

Sharing time with individual family members creates enduring bonds of love, trust, and respect.

Parents Should Spend Individual Time with Their Children

Family members need to spend time together. Family home evenings, family outings and vacations, family work projects, family councils, family prayers, and extended family activities—all contribute to family unity and provide cherished memories. However, it is also very important for parents to spend individual time with each child. This separate time helps children to feel unique and worthwhile.

President Ezra Taft Benson has counseled parents not to overlook this important aspect of family relationships. "Take time to be a real friend to your children. Listen to your children, really listen. Talk with them, laugh and joke with them, sing with them, play with them, cry with them, hug them, honestly praise them. Yes, regularly spend unrushed one-on-one time with each child" (*To the Mothers in Zion* [pamphlet, 1987], pp. 8–9). This counsel also applies to marriage relationships.

Children continue to need individual attention as they grow up. When parents establish a pattern of sharing feelings, setting goals, and counseling together, family members will naturally continue to share their feelings and experiences as they mature. One sister who had been living away from home for a number of years found herself facing some important decisions. Because of the strong bond of trust and respect established between her and her parents as she was growing up, she wanted very much to talk with them face-to-face about her concerns. She had only a brief visit with them—an hour or two of talk squeezed between a twelve-hour drive in each direction. But the visit was well worth the effort because of the support and love she shared with her parents.

Sometimes informal conversations between parent and child or husband and wife are not enough. Many have found more structured settings to be valuable and rewarding. Participants understand that there is a private, uninterrupted time when love, testimony, and concerns can be freely and honestly expressed and that any information shared will remain confidential.

Parent and child interviews can be successful in one- or two-parent families. These interviews are not intended to be like worthiness interviews conducted by a bishop. Nor are they like priesthood oral evaluation interviews. The following suggestions would be helpful in informal conversations or more structured interviews.

Be flexible. A group of fathers were interviewed, with these results: " 'Every week I have an interview with my children,' many of them said. And quite a few stressed that while some of those interviews were of a spiritual nature, others were more of a 'how are you doing' type of interview. 'We talk about grades, about their schoolwork, about their friends, about their hobbies—whatever they're interested in. It gets so they ask me, 'Daddy, when can I have an interview?'" " (Orson Scott Card, "How to Be a Full-time Father," *Ensign*, Mar. 1978, p. 6).

Subjects discussed will vary according to the participants. The interview may be a comfortable setting for talking about important issues and encouraging each child to set personal goals. For example, the parent and child might consider such diverse subjects as clothing needs, physical health, feelings about siblings and friends, financial responsibility, education and career planning, preparation to receive ordinances, preparation for missions and temple marriage, sex education, testimony development, school, church, jobs, and Scouting.

In some families, parents prefer to have the child decide what is to be discussed, making themselves available to listen and give counsel when asked.

Older children may respond more readily to a more casual one-on-one situation. For example, one parent says that "during that weekly session we do whatever they want. Usually we end up talking—but if they want my help on building a model or just want to toss a ball around for a while, then we do that" (quoted in Card, "How to Be a Full-time Father," p. 6). This kind of activity could be described as an interview. It does not have to be scheduled or preplanned. It is important to be flexible and consider individual needs and preferences.

During the interview, parents can learn about each child's needs and counsel with him about them. An interview is an excellent opportunity to teach decision-making and problem-solving skills.

One father and mother said: "At times, nothing special happens, but sometimes it has been a great tool to challenge children to improve in some areas. It's also a good setting for sharing problems and for encouragement" (quoted in Kathy England, "Three Plagues of Parenting," *Ensign*, Apr. 1978, p. 16).

Seek divine guidance. Praying together is an important part of an interview. It allows parents and children to humble themselves, express gratitude for the relationship they share, and acknowledge their need for guidance. In the prayer, parents can express love for and confidence in the child and ask the Lord to direct the interview.

Show love. Some parents find that interviews are more comfortable if they sit next to the child rather than across a table or at a distance from him. Parents can show love and encouragement by a hug or an arm around a shoulder. They can also avoid lecturing and judging.

Encourage discussion. Parents can encourage discussion by avoiding questions that can be answered with yes and no. Such questions as "How do you feel about it?" "What do you think?" or "How can I help you?" are better than "Why are you always late?" Threatening questions make the child defensive and make counseling seem more like a punishment than a help. Discussing past mistakes and poor judgments detracts from the spirit of the interview.

One parent told her son: "I am proud of the way you are growing and developing. You are being very helpful at home. However, we all need to improve. Which areas of your life do you think you need to improve?" This approach gave the son the opportunity to think about and bring up for discussion the subjects he was concerned about.

Listen. We listen to increase our understanding. Elder Marvin J. Ashton suggested that in talking with family members, "we should all increase our ability to ask comfortable questions, and then listen—intently, naturally" (in Conference Report, Apr. 1976, p. 80; or *Ensign*, May 1976, p. 53). Listening requires patience and concentration. By observing a child's voice tones, body posture, or gestures, we can learn more about what he is feeling. When we are aware of feelings as well as words, we can understand better.

There will be times when children will not want to talk. Parents may be able to help the child change his attitude by working on building a better relationship. They may want to delay discussions if tensions are high. They should keep confidential the things the child says. This will build confidence and respect as well as a loving relationship.

We Should Spend Individual Time with Other Family Members Also

The above guidelines apply equally well to improving marriage relationships. Elder Robert E. Wells suggests that couples have a meeting in which they invite the Spirit of the Lord to help them resolve any conflicts by discussing and solving them together.

“The structure of any husband/wife discussion is, of course, flexible. . . .

“However and whenever it is held, the discussion should focus on listening and understanding each other, solving problems, and giving loving support for the good things that are happening in the relationship. . . .

“I’d suggest that you start with the good things. Begin by expressing gratitude for each other and for your blessings. Tell your spouse the things you’re most grateful for—things you most like about him or her. Be specific. Mention detailed instances and events that clearly illustrate good things your partner has done. And express your honest feelings of gratitude and love. Relationships thrive on positive thoughts, positive words, positive actions.

“After sharing sincere feelings of gratitude and appreciation, you may feel that this is an appropriate time to discuss frustrations or problems in your relationship. As you do, remember Paul’s words: ‘Let the husband render unto the wife due benevolence: and likewise also the wife unto the husband.’ (1 Cor. 7:3.) Warmth, sensitivity, and consideration should be dominant feelings during the discussion. . . .

“The objective is to *understand each other’s feelings*, to see things from the other person’s point of view, and to discuss ways to resolve problems. . . .

“Compromises are often necessary. As we compromise, we protect feelings and respect the other’s right to be different. But items that *are* important are mentioned and resolved” (“Overcoming Those Differences of Opinion,” *Ensign*, Jan. 1987, pp. 61–62).

We can build other relationships by spending individual time with extended family members. Time spent talking alone with grandparents and others of our extended family can provide opportunities for listening and counseling. Roommates and friends can share thoughts and feelings and respond to each other’s needs if they will apply the principles discussed in this lesson.

We need to turn to the Lord for help in dealing with family relationships. Elder Wells counsels us to “seek the Lord’s help in understanding each other, resolving challenges, and reaching appropriate decisions—all without becoming defensive. Even

more important, we must seek his help in changing our behavior and our hearts. . . . As we draw near to the Lord, he can help us grow closer to one another" ("Overcoming Those Differences of Opinion," p. 62).

Additional Resources for Personal and Family Use

Carlos E. Asay, "Parent-child Interviews," in Conference Report, Oct. 1983, pp. 16–19; or *Ensign*, Nov. 1983, pp. 14–15.

Geri Brinley, "The Book of Mormon As a Guide for Parents," *Ensign*, July 1988, pp. 39–41.

Cynthia Covey Haller, "An Evening with Dad," *Ensign*, June 1987, p. 43.

Leah Poole Wright, " 'Dad, What Do You Want to Talk About?' " *Ensign*, Mar. 1983, pp. 18–19.

Suggestions for Teachers

1. Prayerfully assess the needs of class members and adapt the lesson as the Spirit directs. In what ways can the suggestions apply to those who are unmarried or living alone? How can relationships be strengthened between Church members? Between colleagues? Between parents? Between brothers and sisters?
2. Discuss the need for spending individual time with those we love. How are family members strengthened by these experiences? Ask sisters to share their feelings about times when they have felt closer to family members because of individual time spent with them.
3. How can personal interviews strengthen bonds within the family? You may wish to invite a family to describe briefly how they conduct interviews, both casual and structured. What makes the interviews successful? Unsuccessful? What can we do when a child is reluctant to participate? Why is confidentiality so important?
4. What is the advantage of having interviews or discussions regularly and frequently? How can the guidelines in the lesson help to strengthen a marriage? Why is it important to ask for the Lord's help with our interviews or discussions? Ask sisters to share experiences in which they have discussed problems with family members after praying about them together.